

# North American Students in Israel: An Evaluation of a Study Abroad Experience

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## **I n t r o d u c t i o n**

Every year, thousands of students worldwide leave home for the purpose of participating in an educational experience in a different country. Israel is one of the many destinations offering study abroad programs. Yet, being a Jewish country and a homeland for the Jewish Diaspora (Jewish communities outside Israel), Israel constitutes a unique study abroad case since it is typically Jewish students from all over the world who choose to take part in these programs. While, internationally, the popular incentives which drive students to study abroad include the desire to improve foreign language skills (Freed, 1998; Pellegrino, 2005), to be introduced to new cultures (Kline, 1993), to receive international work experience and to develop independent skills (Abe, Geelhoed & Talbot, 2003), these are not the primary reasons why Jewish students choose to study in Israel. Rather, their main purpose for spending time in Israel is to strengthen their Jewish identity and become familiar with their own Jewish heritage (Herman, 1970; Chazan, 1992; Cohen, 2003). Studying Hebrew, one of Israel's official languages, is most often considered a secondary aim (Friedlander, Talmon & Moshayov, 1991). Nonetheless, study abroad programs in Israel do include a language component, since it is assumed that learning Hebrew will help enhance students' Jewish awareness and identity (Arnold, 2000).

The purpose of this research is to investigate changes in self-ascribed identity among study abroad students in Israel as a result of the time spent in the country, and to examine the gains in their Hebrew language proficiency. Attitudes towards the host country and local culture are also explored for the purpose of better understanding the relationship between students' identity, Hebrew language proficiency and dispositions about Israel (Gardner, 1985;

Giles & Byrne, 1982). Since North America has the largest Jewish community outside Israel, North American students (from the United States and Canada) make up the majority foreign population studying in Israel (Cohen, 2003; United Jewish Communities, 2003). The current study concentrated specifically on North American students taking part in a study abroad program in Israel, seeking to understand how the study abroad experience in Israel influenced students' identities, attitudes and Hebrew language proficiency.

### **T h e I s r a e l i C o n t e x t a n d S t u d y A b r o a d P r o g r a m s**

Given its independence in 1948, Israel became a home for the Jewish people, attracting thousands of Jewish immigrants from all over the world. With a current Jewish population of more than four million, Israel is also considered the homeland and a heritage country for Jews living in and outside the country.

Since its establishment, Israel has made numerous efforts through various Zionist organizations to foster Jewish identity among the Diaspora Jews, and to maintain close contact with Jewish communities outside Israel, in the hope that some of them will decide to make Israel their permanent home (to make *Aliyah*). One of the many means of achieving this connection with Diaspora Jews is by offering study abroad programs (Herman, 1970; Mittelberg, 1994).

The first study abroad programs in Israel were initiated in the 1960s, and rooted within the World Zionist Organization. In 1983 a "one year program" was inaugurated, with the intention of increasing the number of Jewish students coming to Israel for a year's study. The program is supported by the Jewish Agency, which subsidizes scholarships, overseas recruitment activities, development of university courses, accommodations, and social activities during the students' stay.

The need to strengthen and intensify the program in the 1980's was a direct result of Jewish communal and educational leaders sensing that Jewish identity was in crisis, especially in North America, and concluding that Jewish education was the appropriate response (Jewish Education Committee, 1990). It was resolved that the "Israel experience" was a key means for the enrichment of Diaspora Jewish education (Mittleberg, 1994). The fundamental goal of the program was to invest in every kind of Jew, from secular to religious, and to instill in them the experience of Jewish community life (Zisenwine & Schers, 1999). As noted by the Jewish Education committee, "The program would develop a joint effort to increase the number

of Jewish students from overseas coming to attend universities in Israel" (1990, p.186). The curriculum for study abroad programs in Israel includes subjects related to Israeli culture, such as geography, history, culture and current affairs.

Underlying the establishment of study abroad programs in Israel was the assumption that, since a period of study outside the resident country is recognized as a valid part of the curriculum at universities in the US, Canada, and other countries, it would be possible to increase the number of students coming in for a years' study. Since it was inaugurated in 1983, the year-long program for students from overseas is believed to be "one of the best and most efficient programs" (Jewish Education Committee, 1990, p.202).

Regarding the fulfillment of goals, research concludes that a trip to Israel can have a profound impact strengthening participants' Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish people (UJC, 2003). Furthermore, it has been maintained that Jewish education and practice are linked with a positive attachment to Israel (Mittleberg, 1999). Yet, the question remains, what came first, Jewish practice and affiliation or a strong attachment to Israel? This question highlights the inherent difficulties in inferring cause-and-effect relationships in a study based on cross-sectional data (Mittleberg, 1999). However, an attempt can be made to understand better the relationship by implementing a pre-post design study, such as the one presented here.

### **Profile of Jewish Students Studying Abroad in Israel**

Jewish students who choose to participate in a study abroad program in Israel tend to come with favorable attitudes towards the country and with a prior emotional attachment expecting to feel '*at home*' in what they consider a Jewish homeland (Herman, 1970; Friedlander, et al., 1991; Cohen, 2003). Many of them, including the North American students, are somewhat familiar with the history of Israel, Jewish religion and Zionism (UJC, 2003). Often, this is a result of attending Jewish schools, afternoon and Sunday schools, Jewish summer camps and youth groups, and/or by taking *bar/bat mitzvah* lessons, i.e. Jewish lessons given to adolescents at the age of 12 (for girls) or 13 (for boys). Nearly half (45%) report having family or close friendship ties in Israel (UJC, 2003), while about a third have already visited Israel (UJC, 2003). In other words, current trends of the new millennium reveal a strong religious-cultural-national socialization from home, as well as in the community.

Nonetheless, despite students' Jewish background, which often includes Hebrew language lessons, only a small portion of this population becomes competent in Hebrew, one of the two official languages in Israel and the main language used in the Israeli public sphere (Mittleberg, 1999).

### **T h e L a n g u a g e C o m p o n e n t I n t h e S t u d y A b r o a d P r o g r a m I n I s r a e l**

Revived as a spoken language only a century ago, Hebrew occupies a central role in Israeli society and is closely linked to ideological, political and social issues (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). Hebrew is and has been viewed as the main vehicle in the creation of the new Israeli nation-state, and as a means of facilitating the construction of a new social identity of the many new immigrants who have arrived in Israel over the years. As part of this new social identity, a "new" language was adopted by the early waves of Zionist immigrants in order to create social uniformity (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). The underlying belief was that Hebrew could unify all segments of Jews under one common roof with one common identity (Harshav, 1993). The Hebrew language played many roles in the rise of Zionism: it was a symbol of Jewish nationality and culture, a unifying factor among the nation's people, as well as a substitute for neglected religious observances (Ben-Bassat, 1999).

The legitimization of Hebrew was strongly reinforced by Israel's various formal and informal social institutions such as the army, youth movements, communal settlements, educational system, mass media and government (Ben-Rafael, 1994; Harshav, 1993). Hebrew became the dominant language of public life with a wide range of uses in the public domain, dominating (and even excluding) all other languages, including the second official language, Arabic.

Since Hebrew is viewed as a language which serves to help maintain Jewish identity as well as identification with the Jewish nation (Waxman, 1999), study abroad students receive an intensive language program (*ulpan*) during their stay. The Hebrew course grants them six university credits (500-550 hours) and is similar to language courses provided free of charge to every newcomer in Israel. The purpose of these courses is to support newcomers in mastering the Hebrew language and to facilitate their entry into the social institutions and cultural life of the veteran community.

In addition to formal study of Hebrew in the classroom setting, it is natural to expect informal learning opportunities through exposure to the language spoken in daily life, incorporating interactive and passive learning processes

(Laubscher, 1994). The Israeli media, taxi drivers, passersby, family members and Israeli students are all assumed to provide this kind of exposure so often needed for language learning. And yet, as in many other countries today, the host population has sufficient knowledge of English in order to communicate (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). In Israel, English-speakers usually have the option to fall back on their native tongue. Hence, acquiring Hebrew in Israel becomes even more challenging. In addition, since the students come for a limited period of time, their commitment to learning the host language may be weaker (Arnold, 2000). Finally, as noted by other researchers (e.g. Freed, 1998; Pellegrino, 1998), interactions with native speakers which supposedly take place in the so-called “immersion” environment are far less intense and frequent than once assumed.

Indeed, of all aspects researched in study abroad programs, improved language proficiency as a result of the study abroad experience is one important factor that has produced mixed results and has been addressed as the “language myth” (Wilkinson, 1998). While some studies have shown no changes in students’ linguistic proficiency (e.g. DeKeyser, 1991; Wilkinson, 1998; Freed, Lazar & So, 1998; Freed, So & Lazar, 1999; Regan, 1995), others have found significant gains even after a three-month exchange program (e.g. Lapkin, Hart & Swain, 1995, Freed, 1995, Milton & Meara, 1995).

### **P r e v i o u s R e s e a r c h o n S t u d y A b r o a d P r o g r a m s i n I s r a e l**

A number of previous research studies have focused on various aspects related to study abroad students in Israel. Most of these studies have focused on North American students, as this has always been the largest group of visiting students to Israel (Cohen, 2003).

The first and most seminal research study was conducted in the 1960s by Herman (1970), who collected data on a group of 87 students studying for one year in a study abroad program in Israel. In this study, questionnaires were first administered aboard the ship sailing for Israel and again four months into the program. Background data revealed that the academic learning experience was of secondary importance for the majority of students with a strong Jewish upbringing.

However, after spending four months in the country, students’ enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards the country, towards Israeli people and towards the Hebrew language lowered significantly. Students were deterred by the Israeli behavior, which they considered rude and unwelcoming, and a

gradual process of differentiation set in of “us” vs. “them.” They perceived Israelis as having a negative stereotype toward North American students and on the whole avoiding them. In addition to students’ great disappointment in the area of social contact with their hosts, struggling with the complexities of the Hebrew language also made students much less enthusiastic about Israel and its language. However, with regard to students’ identity, no significant change was detected in their American identity, but students did intensify their attitudes towards Jewish identity.

Similar results were found by Friedlander et al. (1991), who investigated 626 North American students enrolled in a study abroad program in Israel during the late 1980s. Students complained about the social distance between them and their Israeli hosts and commented that their Israeli experience could have been more rewarding if more contacts were established with Israeli students. However, even though students expressed disappointment with their Israeli experience, those who acquired more Hebrew throughout the year were the ones who better adjusted to their surroundings. Findings related to students’ Jewish identity were also in congruence with Herman (1970), that is, for most of the students the year of study in Israel moved them one step closer to their socialization as Jews.

A large-scale study of US students studying in Israel during the 1990s (Cohen, 2003) analyzed motivations of students to study in Israel. It found that despite being enrolled in institutions of higher education, the academic factor emerged as the least important motivation for undergraduate visiting students. The most frequent reasons provided by the students for coming to Israel were to be in Israel, the Jewish homeland (95%), enhancing Jewish and Israeli studies (86% and 85% respectively) and improving Hebrew skills (83%). Gaining Israeli friends was mentioned by 64% of the students. This study did not investigate changes in students’ attitudes, perceptions, identity or Hebrew language proficiency as a result of the Israeli experience.

In conclusion, previous research investigating North American students studying in Israel point to a similar direction. However, the above studies, which focused on changes in students’ attitudes, identities and language proficiency, were all conducted in the 1960s and 1980s. Since tremendous efforts are still invested in recruiting North American Jewish students to study abroad programs in Israel, it is of interest to find out whether the current study abroad experience in Israel does, in fact, influence students’ lives, in terms of identity, Hebrew language proficiency, and attitudes towards the host country in a similar way as it did in the past.

## **R e s e a r c h   O b j e c t i v e s**

The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of a study abroad experience in Israel on North American students in terms of their Hebrew language proficiency, identity, and attitudes towards Israel and Israeli people. More specifically, three research questions were addressed:

1. Is there a change in North American students' attitudes, identity, and perceived Hebrew language proficiency based on the study abroad experience?
2. What is the relationship among attitudes, identity, and language proficiency before and after the study abroad program?
3. Which variables, i.e. background variables, attitudes, and identity, best predict Hebrew language proficiency among the students?

## **M e t h o d**

### **T h e   R e s e a r c h   C o n t e x t**

The research context chosen for the current study involves US and Canadian students in a study abroad program affiliated with one of the major universities in the center of Israel. Study abroad programs in Israel were designed to meet the academic needs of full-time students enrolled in an undergraduate program. The courses are taught in English by university faculty members. Similar to study abroad programs around the world, the programs are designed to qualify for full credit at US and Canadian universities. Students may choose to enroll for one or two semesters. In addition to their academic studies, students participate in an intensive Hebrew language program (*ulpan*) which grants six academic credits. Aside from teaching Hebrew language skills during the *ulpan*, the general Hebrew studies curriculum for study abroad students is designed to focus on subjects related to Israel and the physical and cultural aspects of the Israel experience. The underlying belief is that students who participate in these programs come to Israel with the expectation to acquire Hebrew in its' cultural, historical and contemporary context. All program students live in dormitories on-campus.

### **P a r t i c i p a n t s**

The research sample included 58 North American Jewish students who participated in a study abroad program at a major university in Israel during the 2001–2002 school year. Of the 58 students, 40 were from the US and

18 from Canada. The participants were 23 males (40%) and 35 females (60%), aged 19 to 36 ( $M=22.5$ ;  $S.D. = 3.00$ ). All were from a relatively high socio-economic class. In terms of degree of religiosity within Judaism, 53.5% described themselves as conservative, 42.5% as reform and 4% as nonreligious. All participants (100%) claimed English to be their home language with 45 students (83.3%) claiming English as their only mother tongue and the remainder (16.8%) specifying an additional language as their second home language [Hebrew ( $N=6$ ), French ( $N=1$ ) and Russian ( $N=1$ )]. According to the questionnaire, Hebrew was the mother tongue for 13% of the students' mothers and 17% of their fathers. Furthermore, 85% of the respondents indicated they had prior knowledge of Hebrew before joining the study abroad program with 43.5% reporting they had taken Hebrew bar/bat mitzvah lessons; 41.5% participated in Hebrew afternoon school; 27% learned Hebrew by speaking with family members; 22.5% studied in a Jewish school, and 20% participated in Hebrew Camps. For 70% of the respondents, the current visit was not their first to Israel. Most of them had visited once or twice before. Half reported having relatives living in Israel. No significant differences were found between the US and Canadian students in any of the background variables.

When asked to specify the reasons for choosing Israel as their study abroad destination, "to be in Israel" was the top reason (64%). This was followed by "a desire to learn and improve Hebrew" (52%), and then "to strengthen their Jewish identity" (32%), and finally a general "desire to study abroad" (10%).

### R e s e a r c h I n s t r u m e n t a n d P r o c e d u r e

The research instrument used was a self-report questionnaire which was based in part on existing questionnaires (Herman, 1970; Friedlander et al., 1991; Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt, 1998; Donitsa-Schmidt, 1999) and in part created specifically to meet the needs of the current study and population (Vadish, 2004).

The questionnaire was administered twice in a pre-post design. It was first distributed at the beginning of the study abroad program upon arrival in Israel, and then again after a five-month interval. Most of the questions were kept unchanged in the two settings. Two pilot questionnaires were distributed several days before the final administration to ensure coherency and clarity. The final version of the questionnaire, which was then administered semi-anonymously (i.e. asking students to write down their birth-date and mother's maiden name in order for the pre-post questionnaires to be matched) in class to all students present that day, included four parts.

Part 1 of the questionnaire consisted of 29 socio-demographic and background items including parents' origin, religious affiliation, occupation, level of education, and knowledge of Hebrew; language knowledge and exposure, including Hebrew proficiency; previous contacts and visits to Israel and intentions of staying on upon completion of the program.

Part 2 contained 53 items divided into 3 sections that investigated participants' various attitudinal positions towards Israel, its language, culture, religion and people. All items were structured as statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "disagree completely" (1) to "completely agree" (5). In Part 2, all three sections were construct-validated by subjecting them to a series of exploratory factor analyses with non-orthogonal rotation. These analyses yielded the following main attitudinal factors:

1. importance of Hebrew language for Jews (3 items; pre  $\alpha=.74$ , post  $\alpha=.58$ );
2. desire to learn Hebrew (3 items; pre  $\alpha=.83$ , post  $\alpha=.65$ );
3. difficulties in learning Hebrew (2 items; pre  $\alpha=.69$ , post  $\alpha=.73$ );
4. attitudes towards the importance of Israel for Jews (5 items; pre  $\alpha=.84$ , post  $\alpha=.72$ );
5. desire to live in Israel (2 items; pre  $\alpha=.69$ , post  $\alpha=.73$ );
6. attitudes towards my Jewish identity (4 items; pre  $\alpha=.79$ ; post  $\alpha=.79$ ),
7. attitudes towards preservation of Jewishness of the Jewish people (3 items; pre  $\alpha=.64$ , post  $\alpha=.72$ ),
8. attitudes towards the Middle East situation (3 items,  $\alpha=.77$ ),
9. attitudes towards the degree to which the American Jewish community should be involved in and responsible for Jewish and Israeli existence (6 items, pre  $\alpha=.87$ , post  $\alpha=.86$ ).

In addition to the above attitudinal factors, two more factors emerged in this analysis, both related to participants' degree of knowledge concerning (1) Israeli politics & current affairs (5 items, pre  $\alpha=.93$ , post  $\alpha=.69$ ), and (2) Judaism and Zionism (4 items; pre  $\alpha=.82$ , post  $\alpha=.71$ ).

Part 3 of the questionnaire dealt with self-ascribed identity of the participants. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they identify themselves as being North American, Jewish and Israeli, each identity ranging on a 5-point Likert Scale of "very weak" (1) to "very strong" (5).

In part 4 of the questionnaire, participants were asked to self-assess their Hebrew language proficiency using 16 “can-do” items ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very well”(5). Two factors were extracted from this section: (1) Hebrew Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which involves predominantly oral, interactive, informal and context-embedded skills (7 items,  $\alpha=.94$  and  $.85$ , henceforth Hebrew BICS), and (2) Hebrew Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP); which involves predominantly academic, formal, context-reduced, cognitively-demanding and non-interactive activity (Cummins, 1979)(6 items,  $\alpha=.93$  and  $\alpha=.90$ , henceforth Hebrew CALP). Since a significant and extremely high correlation was found between Hebrew BICS and CALP, in the pre-context ( $r=.81$ ;  $p<.001$ ) as well as in the post-context ( $r=.80$ ;  $p<.001$ ), a general factor of Hebrew proficiency was also created.

The final part of the questionnaire also included information regarding the frequency of Hebrew usage using 14 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “never” (1) to “always” (5). Based on an exploratory factor analysis the following two factors were extracted: (1) Hebrew speaking and listening (7 items,  $\alpha=.89$ ), and (2) Hebrew reading and writing (3 items,  $\alpha=.81$ ). Finally, an open-ended question was inserted where students were asked to explain how they believe studying and speaking Hebrew have played a role in influencing their experiences in Israel.

## **F i n d i n g s**

**R e s e a r c h Q u e s t i o n 1 :** Is there a change in attitudes, identity and perceived Hebrew language proficiency after the experience of study abroad?

In order to answer the first research question, changes between the pre- and the post-contexts were analyzed via a series of t-tests for attitudes, identity and Hebrew language proficiency. Means, standard deviations and t-tests are presented in Tables 1-3. Higher means indicate more positive attitudes, stronger identification, and higher Hebrew language proficiency. It should be noted that no significant differences were found between the US and Canadian students in any of the variables examined.

### **A t t i t u d e s**

Table 1 presents the differences between the pre- and post-settings for the nine attitudinal scales as well as for the two factors related to knowledge.

Table 1 indicates that after spending approximately five months in Israel in the study abroad program, students reported being significantly more informed about Israeli politics and current affairs ( $t=3.64$ ;  $p< .001$ ) as well as

**Table 1: Differences in Attitudes, Pre- and Post-Contexts**

Attitudes towards:	Pre-test		Post-test		t(p)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Importance of Hebrew language	3.16	.94	3.67	.84	2.33*
Desire to learn Hebrew	4.53	.65	4.45	.80	.48
Difficulties in studying Hebrew	3.11	1.04	3.09	.79	.10
Importance of Israel to Jews	3.95	.79	4.15	.71	1.09
Desire to live in Israel	3.05	1.11	3.43	1.15	1.41
My Jewish identity	3.61	.95	3.86	.89	1.14
Preservation of Jewishness	2.72	1.02	3.46	1.01	3.05**
Middle East situation	2.53	1.03	2.49	.57	.17
Necessary involvement of NA Jewish Community in Israel	3.61	.73	3.30	.55	1.97*
Knowledge of Israeli politics & current affairs	3.20	1.01	3.97	.56	3.64***
Knowledge of Judaism & Zionism	3.15	.88	3.72	.65	3.05**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

about Judaism and Zionism ( $t=3.05$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Participants also felt more positively inclined towards the preservation of Jewishness ( $t=3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and strengthened in their belief that Hebrew is important for Jewish and Israeli culture ( $t=2.33$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Data also indicated that after spending five months in Israel the students significantly weakened their attitudes towards the responsibilities of the American Jewish community ( $t=1.97$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Even though no other significant changes were found, there is an upward trend in the desire to live in Israel ( $t=1.42$ ), in the attitudes towards the importance of Israel ( $t=1.09$ ) and in attitudes towards participants' Jewish identity ( $t=1.14$ ). It is important to note that although no significant change was found in the desire to learn Hebrew, the attitudes towards studying Hebrew are extremely high, and in fact the highest of all, both in the pre- ( $M=4.53$ ) and in the post- ( $M=4.45$ ) contexts. No differences were found in the perceptions of Hebrew as being a difficult language to study nor in attitudes towards the Middle East situation.

## Identity

In both the pre- and post-contexts, students were asked to rank themselves, on a scale of 1 to 5, as to how they felt about being North American, Jewish and Israeli. The results of each identity scale are displayed in Table 2.

As presented in Table 2, North American identity, Jewish identity, and Israeli identity did not significantly change. In other words, the study abroad program did not significantly impact the way in which students described their own identity framework.

**Table 2: Differences in self-ascribed identity, Pre- and Post-Contexts**

Identify as:	Pre-test		Post-test		t(p)
	M	SD	M	SD	
North American	3.98	1.11	3.81	1.27	.58
Jewish	4.42	.90	4.50	.76	.40
Israeli	1.91	1.35	2.20	1.63	.79

In addition to analyzing the differences between the pre- and post-contexts, the three identities were explored in each context separately in order to understand how the participants ranked themselves. Further t-test analyses show that both in the pre-context as well as in the post-context, Jewish identity was the strongest (pre:  $t=2.93; p<.05$ , post:  $t=2.98; p<.01$ ). North American identity was second (pre:  $t=10.76, p<.001$ ; post:  $t=5.73, p<.01$ ), while Israeli identity ranked third.

## Hebrew language proficiency and usage

As noted in the methodology, based on factor analysis, perceived Hebrew language proficiency was divided into two subvariables: Hebrew Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Hebrew Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). In Table 3, means, standard deviation and t-tests for Hebrew proficiency in the pre- and post-context are presented.

Table 3 provides a reconfirmation regarding the type of Hebrew acquired while participating in the study abroad program. In Israel, the students in the program significantly improved their basic communicative skills ( $t=4.25, p<.001$ ). Students were more capable of reading road signs, asking for directions, and writing a simple note to a friend after five months of the program. The cognitive academic skills also improved, but not as significantly ( $t=3.44,$

**Table 3: Differences in perceived Hebrew language proficiency, Pre- and Post-Contexts**

	Pre-test		Post-test		t(p)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Hebrew BICS	2.88	1.32	4.06	.84	4.25***
Hebrew CALP	1.72	.80	2.47	1.09	3.44**

\*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

$p<.01$ ). Clearly, in both the pre- and post-context Hebrew BICS was significantly higher than the CALP (pre  $t=10.00$ ;  $p<.001$ , post  $t=12.83$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

In the post questionnaire, students were asked about their Hebrew usage. It was found that there was significantly ( $t=9.74$ ;  $p<.001$ ) more usage which required speaking and listening ( $M=3.14$ ;  $SD=1.04$ ) than usage that required reading and writing ( $M=1.44$ ;  $SD=.76$ ). These findings reinforce the greater change in the BICS than the CALP.

Related to Hebrew usage and proficiency, students were asked in an open-ended question to explain how they believe studying and speaking Hebrew has played a role in influencing their experiences in Israel. Fifty-three percent of the respondents identified Hebrew as being important for integration into Israeli society and claimed that Hebrew helped them to assimilate and better understand Israeli culture. However, 18% remarked that they rarely or never spoke Hebrew.

**R e s e a r c h Q u e s t i o n 2:** What is the relationship between attitudes, identity, and Hebrew language proficiency before and after the study abroad program?

In order to examine this second research question, Pearson-moment-product correlations were conducted for each set of variables.

### Correlations between Hebrew proficiency and attitudes

It was found that knowledge of Judaism and Zionism significantly and positively correlated with Hebrew language proficiency. This correlation was considerably stronger in the post- ( $r=.44$ ;  $p<.01$ ) as opposed to in the pre-context ( $r=.35$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Furthermore, only in the post-context, did being informed about politics and current affairs, significantly and positively correlate with Hebrew proficiency ( $r=.33$ ;  $p<.05$ ). In the pre-context, the desire to live

in Israel was significantly and positively correlated with Hebrew language proficiency ( $r=.48, p<.01$ ) while in the post-context, holding positive attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew in Jewish and Israeli culture positively correlated with Hebrew proficiency ( $r=.44; p<.01$ ). Interestingly, the post-context data sample did not yield a significant correlation between a desire to live in Israel and any type of Hebrew language skill. Finally, significant positive correlations were found both in the pre- as well as in the post-context between Hebrew language proficiency and attitudes towards the preservation of Jewishness ( $r=.34; p<.01$  for pre- and post-context).

### **Correlations between Hebrew proficiency and identity**

Hebrew language proficiency was found to be negatively correlated with a North American identity both in the pre-context ( $r=-.47; p<.01$ ) as well as in the post-context ( $r=-.47; p<.01$ ). In other words, the more North American they feel, the less Hebrew they know. Israeli identity was found to be significantly and positively correlated with Hebrew language proficiency but a much higher correlation was found in the post-context ( $r=.73; p<.01$ ) than in the pre-context ( $r=.43; p<.01$ ). In this case, it seems that the Israeli experience reinforced the bond. No significant correlations were found between Hebrew proficiency and Jewish identity.

Further correlations among the three identities and Hebrew language usage resulted in a similar pattern. Students who felt strongly about their Israeli identity were motivated to speak the language. After spending a few months in Israel, students who arrived feeling Israeli, felt so even more, and in turn extended their Hebrew language usage into reading and writing ( $r=.47, p<.05$ ).

### **Correlations between attitudes and identity**

Students who identified themselves as Jewish in the pre-context held positive attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew ( $r=.33; p<.05$ ), the importance of Israel ( $r=.36; p<.05$ ), their own Jewish identity ( $r=.56; p<.01$ ), preservation of Jewishness ( $r=.37; p<.05$ ) and the responsibilities of the American Jewish community towards Israel ( $r=.29; p<.05$ ). However, in the post-context, identifying oneself as being Jewish was positively correlated only with the preservation of Jewishness ( $r=.32; p<.05$ ) and the desire to live in Israel ( $r=.50; p<.01$ ).

Those who identified themselves as Israeli in the pre-context were more inclined to want to live in Israel ( $r=.34; p<.05$ ). In the post-context, however, they held positive attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew ( $r=.39; p<.05$ ) and towards their own Jewish identity ( $r=.36; p<.05$ ).

Students who identified themselves as North American were less inclined to want to live in Israel ( $r=-.43; p<.05$ ). They also held negative attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew ( $r=-.38; p<.05$ ), towards their Jewish identity ( $r=-.41; p<.05$ ), and towards preservation of Jewishness ( $r=-.53; p<.01$ ). In addition, they perceived Hebrew as a difficult language to study ( $r=.39; p<.05$ ).

**Research Question 3:** Which variables, i.e. background variables, attitudes, and identity, best predict Hebrew language proficiency?

In order to examine the third research question on identification of the variables which best predict gains in Hebrew language proficiency, two separate regression analyses were conducted for the pre- and post-contexts, with Hebrew proficiency as the dependent variable. In both regressions, the following seven independent variables were entered simultaneously: North American identity, Israeli identity, attitudes towards retaining Jewishness, informed about politics and current affairs in Israel, informed about Judaism and Zionism, desire to live in Israel, and a mother's knowledge of Hebrew. It is important to note that prior to the regression analysis, a series of correlations were conducted between Hebrew proficiency and all the background variables. Since a mother's knowledge of Hebrew proved to have the most significant positive correlation with Hebrew language proficiency it was, therefore, inserted into the regression analysis. The regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

Results of the regression analyses show that both equations were found to be significant, explaining between 48% of variance in the pre-and 75% of variance in the post-context. However, not all independent variables significantly predicted Hebrew language proficiency in all of the circumstances. Out of the seven independent variables included, the variable that best predicted language proficiency in the pre-context is 'mother knowing Hebrew' ( $t=3.51$ ). Other variables significant in predicting Hebrew language proficiency in the pre-context, included a desire to live in Israel ( $t=2.04$ ), and being informed about Judaism and Zionism ( $t=2.71$ ). In other words, students whose mothers know Hebrew, who wish to live in Israel and who are more informed about Judaism and Zionism are likely to be more proficient in Hebrew than others in the pre-context.

In the post-context, Israeli identity best predicted Hebrew language proficiency ( $t=6.41$ ). One additional variable significant in predicting Hebrew language proficiency in the post-context, included being informed about Israeli politics and currents affairs ( $t=3.96$ ). In other words, students who identify themselves as Israeli and who are more informed about Israeli politics

**Table 4: Regression Analyses of Independent Variables Best Predicting Hebrew Language Proficiency in the Pre- and Post-contexts**

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mother's knowledge of Hebrew	.42 (3.51)**	.11 (0.53)
Knowledge of Israeli politics & current affairs	-.01 (-0.01)	3.85 (3.32)**
Knowledge of Judaism & Zionism	.27 (2.25)*	.16 (0.96)
North American Identity	-.12 (-0.84)	.02 (0.09)
Israeli Identity	.09 (0.55)	.74 (6.41)***
Preserve Jewishness among Jews	.03 (0.19)	.05 (0.33)
Desire to live in Israel	.24 (1.92)*	-1.0 (-0.76)
R <sup>2</sup>	48%	75%
F(p)	12.65***	27.87***

**Note.** Values enclosed are standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and t-ratios in parentheses

\*  $p < .05$    \*\*  $p < .01$    \*\*\*  $p < .001$

and current affairs, are likely to be more proficient in Hebrew than others in the post-context.

## **Discussion**

When analyzing the profile of the North American students studying abroad in Israel, it is evident that Israel is indeed a unique study abroad destination. For the Jewish students who arrived in Israel during the 2000–2001 school year, the academic aspect of their stay was of secondary importance. They chose Israel mainly because of their interest in a country to which they viewed themselves related by their Jewishness. The desire to be in Israel, to learn Hebrew, and to strengthen their Jewish identity were ranked high by most of the participants. Further exploration of their profile reveals that many of them had some kind of Jewish education in their past and were somewhat

informed about Judaism and Zionism. Many of them had already visited Israel and half of them reported having close relatives in Israel. In addition, most of them had previous encounters with the Hebrew language, either through their previous Jewish education or because of family members who knew Hebrew. In most cases, their level of Hebrew proficiency at the beginning of the program was found to be fairly basic, and, even, nonexistent. These findings are in line with previous research studies conducted on North American students participating in study abroad programs in Israel (Herman, 1970; Friedlander et al., 1991; Cohen, 2003).

Results of the current study also confirm previous studies which showed that for study abroad participants, spending time in a foreign country, in an environment different from their own culture, is bound to produce changes beyond those that would occur in the ordinary course of maturation (Freed, 1995; Pellegrino, 2005). The results of the current study provide evidence as to how the study abroad student program in Israel affected the lives of each student.

First and foremost, students improved their level of Hebrew and became more proficient not only in their ability to use Hebrew for everyday communication purposes, but also, although to a lesser extent, in their literate and more academic Hebrew skills. These substantial linguistic gains are probably due, in part, to their intensive Hebrew course (the *ulpan*) and also to their mingling in Israeli society, which is especially noteworthy because of the dominant role that English plays in Israeli society. For English-speaking students, using Hebrew is not an easy task because there are so many determined English-speaking Israelis who refuse to use Hebrew when provided with an opportunity to converse in English. Thus, the phenomenon that the students did manage to converse in Hebrew is indicative of the fact that they were indeed motivated to learn Hebrew. This finding is in contrast to other findings that show that students have a tendency to prefer to use their first language (e.g. Pellegrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). This, again, highlights the unique nature of study abroad programs in Israel. It should be noted however, that the fact that students' Hebrew communicative skills outperformed the literacy skills is in line with previous research (e.g. Kline, 1998; Freed et al., 1998, 1999).

Noticeable changes were also found among the attitudinal factors. At the end of the five months, students perceived Hebrew as being a much more important language than at first. They were also more favorable towards the preservation of Jewishness among Jewish people around the world, held more

positive attitudes towards Israel and towards their Jewish identity, and expressed a slightly stronger desire to stay in Israel. These findings contradict previous research on North American students in Israel that found that students' initial favorable dispositions towards Israel were lowered with time as they felt disillusioned and disappointed (Herman, 1970) and that students' assessment of Israelis was generally poorer after they left than before coming (Friedlander et al., 1991). Two possible explanations may be offered to explain this discrepancy. First, it could be that today's Jewish students are more informed about the varied population living in Israel and are more respectful of these different types of people. It is possible that in the last ten years Jewish organizations, education, and globalization, have better prepared the students for the reality of Israeli society more accurately. This also could be as a result of previous encounters with Israelis during past visits to Israel. Second, the changes that occurred in Israeli society in recent decades such as the mass migration from the former USSR, political changes taking place in the Middle East, and the growing diffusion of English, have resulted in a more liberal and welcoming Israeli society than it once was (Donitsa-Schmidt, 1999).

Findings also show that students grew more informed about Israel, its politics and current affairs. This broadening of knowledge related to Israel is probably one of the factors that made students more likely culturally aware and played an important role in their acculturation process (Freed, 1995; Pellegrino, 1998, 2005). Clearly, some of this information was gained in the *ulpan*, but more was gained beyond the classroom setting. Out-of-class learning seems clearly to have positively impacted language gains. That is, learners who attempt to apply classroom learning to the 'real world' will be the ones who ultimately make the most progress (Wilkinson, 1998). Indeed, results of this study show that students who were more informed about Israel at the end of the program were also the ones who made the most progress in Hebrew.

Although substantial changes were found in students' level of Hebrew and in their attitudes, no differences were found in their self-ascribed identity. Both in the pre-, as well as in the post-context, Jewish identity was by far the strongest identity; second was North American identity, while the weakest was their Israeli identity. Clearly, an individual's identity is difficult to change in a short span of time (Friedlander et al., 1991). Their first identity, Jewishness, brought them to Israel to begin with and being surrounded by Jews for five months did not change their position regarding their Jewishness. Their second identity as North Americans was also hard to change as they were first and foremost identified by their surroundings as Americans during

their stay abroad. Finally, their weakest identity throughout the program was the Israeli one. However, there was no plausible reason to believe that a temporary visit to a foreign country, no matter how intense the experience, would make one feel a member of that country. It was the Jewishness that the students saw as the link between Israelis and themselves.

Since students' Jewish identity did not change, it may seem that they did not succeed, after all, to fulfill their primary purpose, which was to strengthen their Jewish identity. On the contrary, their attitude towards the preservation of Jewishness among Jewish people was found to be more positive after five months. In addition, a ceiling effect exists when it comes to their Jewish identity as it was already very strong to begin with.

Apart from investigating changes as a result of the study abroad experience, this study also tried to explore the possible relationships among second language proficiency, attitudes and identity. The current study supports the literature suggesting a link between social identity, language proficiency (usage) and linguistic attitudes (Gardner, 1985; Giles & Byrne, 1982). Students who held more positive attitudes towards Israel, its language, culture and people, were those who displayed considerable improvement in their Hebrew proficiency. By having a more accommodating attitude, students were open to interaction with the host society, and increased their opportunities to practice the target language, Hebrew. In addition, students were more inclined to acquire more knowledge about Israeli society. Identity was also found to be correlated with language gains. Students who identified themselves more as Israeli were the ones who made the largest leap in their Hebrew proficiency, reflecting again the strong connection between acculturation and language proficiency (Schumann, 1976; Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1993; Milleret, 1990). Moreover, the "Israelis" were the only ones who managed to acquire more than just the basic communicative skills (BICS) in order to get by. The "Israelis" were able to improve their academic language proficiency (CALP) in the language. Conversely, stronger identification as North Americans led to the exact opposite pattern resulting in poor linguistic gains. Furthermore, those who identified themselves as North Americans held fewer positive attitudes towards Hebrew and towards their Jewish identity. Interestingly, Jewish identity did not correlate with Hebrew proficiency, but did correlate with the desire to live in Israel. It is important to note that the above correlations attest to the great variations existing among the students, variations which have been documented by numerous researchers (e.g. Huebner, 1995; Kline, 1998; Freed, 1998).

The third aim of the research was to identify the variables that best predict Hebrew language proficiency. Different predictive variables were found in the pre-and post-contexts. At the start of the program, mothers' knowledge of Hebrew served as a stronger determinant for the students knowing Hebrew: it is an inherent background variable which initially impacted linguistic proficiency. Additional predictive variables were the students' level of being informed about Judaism and Zionism and his or her desire to live in Israel. However, the predicting variables in the post-context were entirely different. After five months, it was students' Israeli identity that became the strongest predicting variable and how informed students were about Israel, its politics and current affairs. While background variables (mother's Hebrew), knowledge (Judaism and Zionism) and attitudes (towards living in Israel) were the variables that best predicted Hebrew language proficiency initially, students' identity (Israeli) and level of acculturation (knowledge about Israel) predicted Hebrew proficiency at the end of the program. This further highlights the connection between identity, acculturation and second language proficiency.

As noted above, students became informed about Israel through exposure to the language, either by informal conversations with Israeli people or by exposure to the Israeli media. By interacting with Israelis, and perhaps even by making friends, students were able to apply classroom-based language learning to real world situations. These details may have contributed to the variations among individual study abroad language learners. That is, students who moved beyond the L1 English-speaking territory not only acquired more Hebrew, but also learned more about Israeli life. As previously noted, this is not easily achieved since English speakers, empowered by their L1, often rely on it to communicate in another language, especially when the hosts are fairly competent in English (Coleman, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998). It takes a highly motivated person to step out of the boundaries of English into the target language and culture, which evidently is what characterizes many of the Jewish North American students. This finding highlights individual variations and corroborates previous research (e.g. Huebner, 1995; Kline, 1998; Freed, 1998).

To conclude, even though language learning was not the prime reason for choosing Israel, as is often the case in other study abroad destinations (Pellegrino, 2005), participants reported significant improvement in their Hebrew linguistic skills. Language was viewed as more than just an instrumental tool in order to get by in the Israeli context. Instead, Hebrew was one of

the prime assimilative ingredients of students' Jewish self and Israeli self (Pellegrino, 2005), one which gave them access to Israeli values and culture and helped them gain more knowledge about Israel. It seems, therefore, that the Israel-Diaspora connection, which was expected by some to develop through reinforced positive attachment to Israel through education, parental involvement and support, and visits to Israel (Keysar & Kosmin, 1999) is indeed taking place via study abroad programs where Hebrew language learning is intertwined with Jewish identity.

Clearly, the current research is only one step towards a deeper understanding of study abroad in Israel and its' impact on students' lives, the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and Israel itself. The results of this study need to be verified and developed further, ideally by implementing longitudinal research. It would also be worthwhile to compare this study abroad program to similar programs taking place in other universities in Israel, as well as to compare the experiences of Jewish students from North America to that of students from other countries and continents such as Europe, South America and Australia. It would also be advisable to use more finely-tuned testing instruments to understand further the complex nature of the study abroad experience, which incorporates numerous inter-related factors and variables (Kline, 1998) and to utilize other means of measurement aside from self-report data (Freed, 1998). In addition, since previous studies point to extensive individual differences, it may be worthwhile to conduct a more anthropological qualitative type of study that would inspect with more detail the lives and experiences of study abroad students in Israel. Furthermore, since Israelis' communicative competence was documented to vary significantly from that of North Americans (Katriel, 1986), it would be interesting to focus in future research on the acquisition of certain speech acts such as apologies, compliments and requests which were found difficult to acquire (Marriott, 1995). Finally, it would be of interest to examine the relative impact of formal instruction as opposed to out-of-class exposure in the study abroad context.

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